Lynch / Rivette. Les filles du feu: “Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me” and “Joan the Maid”

Comparing a film by David Lynch with one by Jacques Rivette, paired by a new retrospective series in New York.

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This article accompanies the Film Society of Lincoln Center’s dual retrospective of the films of Jacques Rivette and David Lynch and is part of an ongoing review of Rivette’s films for the Notebook*, in light of several major re-releases of his work.*

“I have no idea what happened, I have no idea what I saw,” said Jacques Rivette after seeing *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*. “I left the theater floating six feet above the ground.” Disclosure: like Rivette, I too have never seen *Twin Peaks*. But I do own a television.

In both *Joan the Maid* (1994) and *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992), paired together by the Film Society of Lincoln Center, the outcome is never cast in any doubt: a young girl will be murdered, whether on a pyre in a medieval castle courtyard or in a sodden den in the forest. Laura Palmer is senselessly killed by her abusive, invidious father. Joan is murdered by the English, for affirming her constitution and rejecting the tortured contract she made with her zealously sadistic hosts. The movies were both marketed, two years apart, as the unseen paths that lead two heroines to well-mythologised points of gruesome departure—one depicting inner voices and visions (the demons, the levitating angels) and the other, pointedly, not.

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The unusually linear, grounded *Joan the Maid*—where Rivette effects an order of dutiful straightforwardness, the only reoccurring (or self-perpetuating) situations, otherwise a Rivette staple, being Joan's trudges from battle to antechamber to bed—makes for quite the contrast to Lynch's wild, apoplectic film. Upon release, the latter was criticised for all manner of reasons, not least of which was its single-minded focus on a character who had existed as but a flashback or a cadaver in the original show. Yet, like Joan, described almost as often as seen, Laura ultimately remains a legend—at arm's length. In her near mid-point introduction, the book-clutching walk down the *Halloween*-like tree-lined street, the stride through the school corridors, past rows of lockers and shuffling bodies, the glissading fades upend any hope of identifying *or* identification. Even as you later come to empathise painfully with her manic desperation and suffering, the intensity of Sheryl Lee's performance, coupled with Lynch's resistance to entirely assimilating her point-of view, transform Laura into a mysterious object.

In Rivette, mysticism takes the form of a collapsing log in the fireplace, startling a room full of squires and maidens watching Joan march past them with the Dauphin. As with Laura Palmer, our relationship to Sandrine Bonnaire's Joan flits between extremes of identification: alternatively, as the hero of an epic we're watching unfold in detail and with transfixed diligence—a character leading us through the film as if to battle, our timid gaze like that of an outside admirer in the flanks—and as an impossibly close subject for our sympathy (Laura haunted by apparitions in her bedroom, Joan by salacious night-watchmen in her prison cell). Joan's sudden bursts of laughter, like the two sharply

contrasting hemispheres of Sheryl Lee's performance, both extremes of placidity and frailty, are always startlingly vivacious,[1] even though Rivette reminds us time and again of her inexperience and proximity to an illiterate childhood. When Joan sees the carnage of battle for the first time, stumbling back to camp like a zombie, she sobs, "Horrible. So horrible." This sense of Joan growing aware that she's in over her head, just as Laura appears to us at the start of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, builds until we hear her final cry from up on the pyre. In a sense, the near 6-hour movie, like *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, is really just about hearing a girlish laugh become, over the course of a few short years, a shrill scream that pierces a nest of rising ash and bowl of almond-like flame.















1. One often sees these Renoirian moments of levity—giggling, slapping, crowing—in Rivette’s lugubrious history films, as if to remind us that the main narrative is but a theatre that others, often secondary characters, Joan excepting, are watching with bemusement.